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**OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN BUYER
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL HEARING
POW/MIA OVERSIGHT**

October 2, 1998

This hearing fulfills a promise I made to many of those present today. This subcommittee has led the effort in Congress on POW/MIA affairs for the last four years, beginning with a series of hearings on POW/MIA issues held during the 104th Congress. These hearings demonstrated a critical need for legislation in this area, which had heretofore been largely relegated to the realm of departmental regulations. This subcommittee responded by creating the Missing Persons Act of 1996. After the provisions of that act were weakened at the end of the 104th Congress, we were able to substantially strengthen the law during the first year of my chairmanship in the 105th Congress.

Now that a year has passed since the law was last changed, the subcommittee will examine Defense Department progress in implementing the law, as well as other issues. In addition, we will hear from family and veterans groups about their view of Defense Department progress, and receive their testimony about the direction the department should take, and any changes to law that should be made.

Frankly, I am concerned that the administration still does not give this issue the priority it deserves. The fact that the Department of Defense is considering reducing the manpower and resources of the Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii, and the Defense POW/MIA Office are just two concrete examples of such reduced priority.

Another way in which our government could demonstrate a true priority for the issue would be to aggressively push for answers on the POW/MIA question. I mean push hard at all levels of government, and across all departments. But I don't see such a broad based commitment. I don't see it in the

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resourcing of the various department agencies charged with the effort, nor do I see commitment in the diplomatic efforts of the nation. For example, it seems as if this issue is invisible in our diplomatic and economic discussions with North Korea, China, and Russia. I do not understand why the State Department is not more aggressive on this issue, and why the Defense Department, as the advocate for the missing and their families, is not leaning on State to make this issue the highest national priority that it is supposed to be.

In a positive vein, I think the Department of Defense has taken the right tack in pursuing unilateral efforts with North Korea to find answers on the POW/MIAs of the Korean Conflict. I note with regret, however, that neither DOD nor the State Department appears to have made an effective approach to China. I ask myself, why not?

Finally, with regard to implementation of the Missing Persons Act, I have heard DOD's commitment to its implementation, but I am disappointed that implementation seems so slow. For example, the Missing Persons Act requires the establishment of personnel files for Korean Conflict POW/MIAs. The information I have indicates that DOD has not yet effectively met that requirement and others under the law. I did not call this hearing to beat up on the Department of Defense...but I do expect to get some answers to my concerns, which I know are shared by the first panel witnesses and my colleagues on the subcommittee.